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TREADING CAREFULLY IN EAST TIMOR

an account of a visit
by Kirsty Sword

Dili, the capital of East Timor, is a small place. To a white foreigner with other than business or tourist interests to pursue in the city, it appears positively tiny.

During a recent week-long visit to the former Portuguese colony, I was constantly aware of being noticed; not an unusual thing in itself in Asia, but here the looks seem to suggest more than just a casual curiosity in one's nationality or motives for being there.

To the local people, physically and mentally barred from contact with the outside world from 1975 to January 1989, the chance of meeting with a foreigner presents all sorts of potential rewards and hazards; on the one hand there's the promise of information exchange, so important in combatting intellectual and moral isolation, and on the other, the threat of persecution, since talking openly with foreigners is, in East Timor's current political climate, tantamount to engaging in a subversive activity.

Needless to say, the burden of this knowledge weighs heavily on the shoulders of the aware and sympathetic tourist, bursting with questions and barely suppressed expressions of solidarity. In spite of this, I was frequently approached by mostly young Timorese who, after testing the water with a number of pointed questions, would launch into discussions of issues such as the Timor Gap Treaty and the thwarted Portuguese parliamentary visit, originally scheduled for mid-August.

Perhaps most distressing of all was the experience of being asked in all earnestness by the local people, what the likely future of their country and aspirations for self-determination were. So distant from a free press and the seats of wealth and power are the Timorese since the invasion, that it would seem the words of complete strangers are now one of the few sources of 'reliable' information available to them.

On the question of the status of their struggle in the eyes of the rest of the world, most are sadly misinformed. The Indonesians, motivated by a desire to promote their presence in East Timor as an irreversible fact, work tirelessly to keep all references to international pressure and solidarity out of the local media. The Timorese themselves, responding to a need to maintain faith in Portugal and Australia's eventual acceptance of their responsibilities, are understandably quick to seize upon rumours of imminent changes, whether these have their source in individuals living outside Timor or sections of the Indonesian army, intent on using the possibility of civil unrest for their own ends.

Rightly or wrongly, many of the Timorese I spoke with were pinning their hopes on the deferred visit of the Portuguese parliamentary delegation, even going so far as to say that it would result in the long-awaited resolution of the East Timor issue. I'm afraid I found it hard to share their optimism and the news I had to offer of my own government's continuing complacency was far from heartening.

Talks I had with a number of priests yielded information which confirmed for me both reports of growing student activism around East Timor plus the important and, to the Indonesians, destabilising, role played by certain members of the Timorese clergy. One such member in Dili told me that on the evening of 17 July, the anniversary of East Timor's integration into Indonesia, some Timorese students at Becora, just outside Dili, had raised the independence flag in the grounds of their high school. The flag stayed flying until 8 am the next morning when the Indonesian authorities came and removed it. He also stressed that the unity of purpose and effective organisation of Dili's youth had been an important factor in the success of the demonstrations staged during the Pope's visit and earlier this year in the presence of the US Ambassador. Despite an extensive Indonesian intelligence network, plans for both protests went undetected until the last.

Like other recent visitors to East Timor, I was filled with admiration for the country's priests and nuns whose humanity and boundless courage are a source of inspiration and hope to the local population, so tragically marginalised in their own homeland. Not only do they provide material support to thousands of children orphaned by the war and disease (most orphanages seemed to house up to 100 children), but they also play an important role in the maintenance of Timorese cultural traditions. I was privileged to be the guest for 4 days of one particular order of nuns who encouraged amongst their novices the learning of songs in the native language and the practice of Portuguese-Timorese handicrafts. Both were sources of great pride, and rightly so.

Like most tourists, I made some purchases whilst in East Timor. My shopping expeditions in Dili had a dual purpose; to find out who the owners of the businesses were and the ethnic origin of the bulk of their customers. I imagined from what I had heard that I would find Indonesians or Chinese both behind and in front of the counter, and I was not proven wrong. The ownership of the vast majority of shops and other businesses was clearly in the hands of non-Timorese, with the local population occupying the lowliest positions in all of these. I sensed on more than one occasion that, had I raised the issue of their exclusion from the country's economic development, I would have aroused some very strong emotions. But then, who wouldn't feel strongly about a political scenario which has made possible the sale of a large plot of land and a house for US$5,000, and effectively denies the owners of that land the right to share in the profits?

I went to East Timor with a clear purpose which was to experience first hand what I'd heard and read so much about over the years. This coupled with the vague but ever-present paranoia of having 'subversive' documents in my possession, certainly played a not insignificant role in determining my responses to people and situations. For example, twice as I made phone calls to Bali from the infamous Hotel Turismo in Dili, my privacy was quite blatantly invaded by, amongst others, the resident member of the Indonesian secret service. Was it culturally acceptable in Timor to stand at the side of a stranger as they made a phone call, or was I right in assuming that the subject of my conversation was of great interest to these people? A subsequent visit paid by two members of the intelligence to my hotel in Bali confirmed the latter, less savoury, option.

I should also say that in Jakarta I had the good fortune to compare notes with a fellow Australian traveller who had paid a visit to East Timor in September 1989. The freedom of movement I was allowed, with only the minimum of bureaucratic formalities, was astounding news to her. Her own attempts at internal travel were plagued by the need for photos, forms and an Indonesian guide at every leg of her proposed journey. I, instead, was able to jump on a bus to Baucau with nothing more than the verbal assent of my prying 'friend' from the Hotel Turismo. Other recently returned visitors have confirmed this relative ease of movement. There appeared to be no military check-points along the main arterial connecting Dili and Baucau, and the only place where an unusually high military presence was obvious was around the Manatuto area, on this same route.

Timorese I spoke with also made mention of a lessening of restrictions which, according to them, is nonetheless a fragile reform, having little to do with a considered change of policy on the part of the Indonesian government. Rather, it appears to be part of the 'hearts and minds' diplomacy of newly appointed colonels Gatut and Waru, chiefs of Intelligence and the Armed Forces respectively.

And the fact remains that, although this change of tactics has undoubtedly meant an improvement in the day-to-day lives of the East Timorese, in the longer term something far more fundamental is required to safeguard their human and cultural rights. Indonesian census figures for 1990 put the non-Timorese population of East Timor at around one sixth of the total. Assuming that this number could in fact be much higher and that transmigration will continue to be a feature of Indonesia's policy of acculturation, the coming years promise to challenge the fighting spirit of the East Timorese. With over 400 years of experience in resisting Western and now Indonesian imperialism, the East Timorese are well equipped to succeed in this task.

(1,350 words)